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AUTHOR Hedge, Dick; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Special problems of adult language learners aged 50 and older studying English as a second language include physical, social, and psychological factors. Physical factors related to aging include vision and hearing problems that adults may not be willing to admit to. Older adults may also be more sensitive to room temperature and lighting, and may need more frequent breaks. Social factors affecting language learning and participation include adults' willingness to share their own experiences, personal biases or sensitivity to cultural comments, reaction to the American style of teaching, expectations of the student-teacher relationship (especially after many years away from formal education), and a preference for a more self-directed learning style. Psychological factors related to age include a lower dependence on short-term memory and lower recall capacity, greater dependence on the relevance of information, anxiety, and unfamiliarity with classroom behavior. Visual aids, hands-on activities, frequent in-class review, careful spacing and pacing, and task-oriented activities as well as teacher sensitivity to the individual adults can help alleviate these problems. (MSE)

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IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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by

Dick Hedge
Patricia McEvoy-Jamil
Thomas P. Woodall

FL014 447

HELPING THE OLDER ADULT TO SUCCEED IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

This paper identifies and discusses some of the special problems of older adult language learners (OALL) in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. The problems to be discussed include physical, social and psychological factors which may affect second language acquisition of persons fifty years and older. Possible techniques that may be useful for helping the OALL to succeed in acquiring a second language are suggested. The concepts discussed here are based on a review of the existing literature, conversations with teachers in the field and our own personal experience. These factors and suggestions, of course, are not limited to use with OALLs; they may be useful with students of all age groups. The ideas expressed in this paper reflect a common-sense approach to dealing with the OALL.

PHYSICAL FACTORS

ESL teachers should be aware that their OALLs may have special needs and problems in the ESL classroom due to the physical effects of aging. For example, vision and hearing impairments related to geriatric decline may keep elderly adult students from fully participating in the language learning experience (Joiner, 1981). These are two physical problems which the instructor should keep in mind because they may not be obvious to him/her at first glance. Also, OALLs may not be willing to admit to having trouble hearing or seeing. Often the only indication that students are experiencing difficulty with their vision or hearing is their behavior. They may squint to see the board, hold small print texts closer, talk unusually loud or

blurt out information at inappropriate times. These observable actions should be a clue to the teacher that a student is not seeing or hearing properly.⁴ As a result, the OALL may feel physically uncomfortable, emotionally distressed, and generally unhappy in the classroom. He/she may disturb others in the class as well. Ultimately, the ESL instructor is responsible for taking the steps necessary for dealing with the situation. He/she can arrange to seat OALLs closer to the front of the room, write larger on the blackboard, provide them with large print texts, speak a little louder, and be more understanding. The younger students should be asked to cooperate in making classroom life easier for the OALLs, too.

Classroom environment is important to adult students, but it may be especially important to older adult students. OALLs may be particularly sensitive to the temperature and lighting of the room (Zemke and Zemke, 1981). They cannot be expected to pay attention to lessons if feeling uncomfortably hot or cold. Since the teacher can usually control the heating and lighting, it is his/her responsibility to see that the classroom is comfortable for the students.

Myers and Lewis (1982) have suggested that adult students be given frequent break periods. OALLs may need to take a break more frequently than younger adults. The elderly students should know that they are free to leave the classroom at any time.

SOCIAL FACTORS

Older adults bring with them a variety of backgrounds and experiences to the language classroom. This wealth of information can be utilized to

benefit the whole class and as a tool to get the OALLs to become more communicative (Brandle, 1977). By drawing upon the students' own experiences, the learning experience can be made more relevant and meaningful, thus providing a good environment for acquisition to occur.

Due to the interrelationship between language and culture, when we teach English we are also teaching our culture. As representatives of our culture, we need to be aware of our own personal biases. OALLs may tend to exhibit an accentuated sensitivity to any remark or comment which they feel is derogatory (whether intended or not) to their native culture and language. We must try to reinforce the fact that their culture and language are just as important and valuable as the language we are trying to teach.

Many OALLs may not like the style of teaching employed in many U.S. classrooms. This may be especially true if the OALL has had experience with other methods in learning a second language in the past (Joiner, 1981). If your style is different from what the OALL expects, you must be prepared to explain that this is your system, and that it is effective. You should advise them that your system is different, not necessarily better, but it is the one used here.

Another problem which may arise with OALLs is their perception of what the teacher-student relationship should be (Joiner, 1981). In many cultures the teacher is considered the font of all knowledge who demands respect with a very authoritarian manner. Unless this is your style, your position and approach may cause conflicts in how the OALLs view you. Therefore, you should be sensitive to this possibility and try to determine how your OALLs prefer

to be dealt with. You should determine how they prefer to be addressed (i.e., is it acceptable to use their first name or would they prefer you to use their surname with a title?). Once you have established what their preference is, respect it.

One of the best ways for instructors to deal with cultural differences is to familiarize themselves with their students' cultures, histories, and school systems (Myers and Lewis, 1982). This will aid the instructor in identifying actual or potential areas of conflict of behavior, attitude and performance. It will also serve as a benefit to both the instructor and the students in making the classroom a more comfortable and interesting place.

Returning to school after a long absence may cause problems for some OALLs, especially if they have had only a limited formal education in the first place (Joiner, 1981). Learning how to relate to the teacher and their fellow classmates may be difficult for many. With OALLs the role of authority is reversed and this may cause them to feel uncomfortable. With a younger teacher, especially, they may resent this feeling of dependency.

Brandle (1977), Joiner (1981), and Myers and Lewis (1982) suggest that many OALLs do not like working in groups. This may be due to feeling insecure about the value of their contributions, being ignored by others, or not receiving the respect they feel they are due from the others. Myers and Lewis (1982) recommend study partners, pairing a faster student with a slower student, rather than group work. It is helpful if they both share the same first language. This system benefits both students, allowing the slower student to receive personal attention and the faster student to review and use what he/she already knows. It is important that both students be agreeable to this type of system

and are able to work well together.

OALLs show a preference for self-designed and self-directed types of projects (Brown and Hill, 1984; Brandle, 1977). These encourage the students to draw upon their own experiences and needs to select and fulfill a learning task, making the class more student-centered. Projects should be used which require the students to get assistance and information from their classmates and the instructor (Roumani, 1978). Care must be taken to avoid isolating the older students; they should be encouraged to interact with others in the class. OALLs have already developed very effective abilities to get things done. They are more likely to succeed if they are encouraged and not hampered by an inflexible lesson plan.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

As we age, the way that we process new information and deal with problem solving changes. After about the age of 30 we begin to shift away from a dependence on the short-term memory, learning through analogy and verbal reasoning. This is accompanied by a reduction in our recall capacity which continues to diminish from young adulthood on, except in persons of high verbal ability (Joiner, 1981).

For the OALL, retention is very closely related to the meaningfulness of the information to the learner (Joiner, 1981; Roumani, 1978; Knox, 1978). If the materials are perceived by the learner as being irrelevant or nonsensical, they probably will not get processed at all. OALLs depend more on their general knowledge of vocabulary, social situations, general background information, and associations with what they already know for processing new

information. This underscores the importance of making our materials relevant and comprehensible, especially for the OALL.

Anxiety is possibly one of the most serious problems OALLs will face in learning a second language (Joiner, 1981). They are taking on a new and difficult task which may cause a fear of failure and which may heighten their feelings of insecurity in the classroom. The school environment may be new and threatening to many. Dealing with younger students may prove frustrating, especially if the OALL feels that he/she cannot keep up or is holding back the class. This may be complicated by an unfamiliarity with how to successfully compete for turns. Making unfamiliar and difficult sounds is hard for everyone, but this effort is heightened for the OALL. Therefore, getting the OALL to produce orally in the classroom may be difficult. The fear of making fools of themselves in the classroom has a tendency to reduce spontaneity in the OALLs. This may cause them to try harder for accuracy. While this may seem like a good thing, for the OALL it can lead to slower response times, less flexibility, or even no responses at all. As teachers, we must encourage them to attempt oral production in a relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere.

We need to work with our OALLs to help them achieve the goals they have set. We should serve as guides and facilitators through this complex process of acquiring a language (Brandle, 1977). For the OALL, short-term, goal-oriented tasks are recommended (Joiner, 1981; Brown and Hill, 1984). These tasks should be accomplishable in brief periods, so that the students can see their progress. By accomplishing more tasks, the students' perception of their own abilities is increased, their motivation improves, and their self-confidence is enhanced. Roumani (1978) recommends drawing up a contract with

your students of the goals they want to accomplish and the sequence they will do them in. These goals can then be checked off by the student as each one is accomplished.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations offered here may help to overcome some of the potential problems caused by the physical, social, and psychological factors discussed above.

Use a lot of visuals

Visual aids can help overcome listening comprehension problems (Myers and Lewis, 1982). This is true whether the students have a physical impairment to their hearing or just have difficulty understanding because they are at a low skill level in the target language. With a visual aid the student can see an image and relate that to the new sound that he/she must associate with that image. Using visuals will also help the students to retain new information for longer periods of time.

If visual aids, such as video cassette recorders, are available, popular TV programs can be used as a fun activity for the class. Programs that have a lot of fast-paced action are particularly useful in reviewing verb tenses. The tape could be stopped at any point and the action discussed. There is almost no limit to the language items and functions that can be practiced and reviewed through the use of video taped TV programs. For example, the simple past tense can be practiced with, "What happened after Jack closed the door?" Or a combination of tenses, such as past progressive and simple past, could be practiced with, "What was Jack doing when the robber came in?" With

more advanced students you could even practice the future (predicting what might take place) such as, "What do you think Jack will say when he gets home?"

Use hands-on activities

As with the use of visuals, the use of hands-on activities and total physical response also aids retention and can help overcome listening comprehension problems (Myers and Lewis, 1982). But it also serves to take the students' minds off of being in a formal classroom situation. While involved in the hands-on activity the students may not be thinking about "learning" per se, rather they may be acquiring subconsciously as they are concentrating on doing the activity. This could help to lower the students' affective filter and aid in the acquisition process.

Plan frequent review

The problem of short-term memory may be universal among all language students, but it is probably particularly true of older adults. Frequent review will help students overcome the problems of short-term memory and it will help build their confidence in themselves as successful language learners (Joiner, 1981; Myers and Lewis, 1982). It is also a good idea to build on previous material. When new material is presented, it should include some parts of the previously-presented material. This, in essence, is another type of review.

Be aware of spacing and pacing

Earl Stevick (1976) refers to studies which have shown that spacing of activities enhances learning. In other words, instead of "massed practice" (numerous consecutive exposures to an item), the idea of "distributed practice"

(the same number of exposures interspersed among other items) is preferred and seems to be a superior method. This is true even though the total amount of time spent in practicing the item is the same in both cases.

Pacing is the idea of letting students learn at their own rate of speed. Studies (Stevick, 1976) have shown that students perform better when allowed to move from one item to another at their own rate rather than being guided at a preset pace through the same material and in the same amount of over-all time.

Use task-oriented activities

It is important to make the classroom task relevant to the needs of our students. We have to keep in mind why they are learning English and what they are going to be doing with English when they are out of the classroom.

The idea of task-oriented activities was presented in some detail by Cheryl Brown and C. Eugene Hill (1984). We might isolate a short-term goal-oriented task such as "Calling for a taxi". This is based on the assumption that many older people depend on taxis to get to the doctor, to get to the grocery store, to visit friends, etc. The tasks can then be divided into subtasks. Each of these should have meaning in and of itself even if none of the other subtasks are learned. For example, the task of "Calling for a taxi" may include the following subtasks: 1) giving a destination; 2) giving a present location; 3) telling when the taxi is needed; and 4) asking about the cost. Even if the overall task is not learned, each of these subtasks, if learned, will be helpful to the language learner.

The next step is to identify the various grammatical structures and vocabulary items that will be needed to teach each subtask. For example,

in order to learn how to give a desired destination, a student should learn structures, such as, "I want to go to ..." or "I'd like to go to ...". Vocabulary items that may be essential to learning this subtask might include the names of various types of destinations (drugstore, grocery store, bank, etc.). Other suggestions for goal-oriented tasks include: 1) getting help in an emergency; 2) taking public transportation; 3) getting information over the phone; 4) calling for repairs; and 5) opening a bank account.

CONCLUSIONS

No one method can guarantee success for the OALL; therefore, an eclectic approach is recommended. A number of different teaching methods should be used to help determine which may produce the best results. However, it may be best to avoid methods which utilize rote memorization.

OALLs can succeed in the acquisition of a second language if the instructor is sensitive to their problems, needs and purposes for being in the ESL classroom. A reduced rate of acquisition (which may vary greatly among individuals) does not mean a reduced learning power. "Almost any adult is able to learn any subject, given sufficient time and attention." (Joiner, 1981 citing Knox, 1978).

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